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Elmer M. Mills

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WITH OSCAR AND VIDA

By Elmer M. Mills

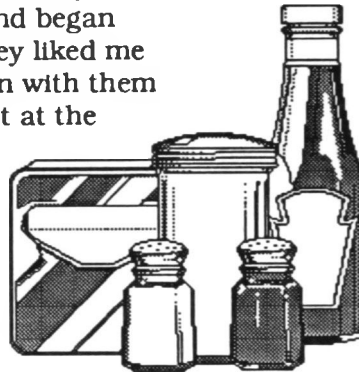
As a kid, I eventually left the town's alleys collecting junk—brass, zinc, etc. My cross-alley buddy, Ezra "Azzy" Etheridge, was my money-making partner. We had quite a business going, but I found out after a job or two of that that "pearl diving" was a much better deal, especially when Oscar and Vida Wallace came to town and began running their "up and coming" restaurant. They liked me and gave me plenty of work; in fact, I stayed on with them even after I had begun wearing long pants. But at the time, I was quite small, and I had to stand on a wooden box in order to do an efficient job. Vida did much of the counter work, tending the front; Oscar did the cooking.

One morning the front was clear. Breakfast was over and all the customers except one were gone. He was the one at the counter staring straight and intently, and most of all motionless, directly at himself in the mirror that stretched across the aisle onto the wall full length of the counter. He was sitting there on the stool, feet on the rail, and his head apparently comfortably perched between his hands and elbows. There he sat, motionless, a sight visible from every angle of the house; and Vida and I had plenty of opportunity to view him without interference. As



I stealthily gazed from behind his back into the mirror beyond, a gruesome, goose-pimpling feeling pervaded me to the bone. Vida and I rotated our best, carefully watching that glassy stare. Just a "Boo!" would have dropped either of us.

The gentleman was no stranger, for he was one of our regular customers. But why this unusual attitude? He was a helper to the undertaker whose place of business was down the street at the furniture store. Finally, Oscar came in and upon observing the man immediately called the doctor. By the time the doctor arrived, we had picked the man up in his sitting position—for he was as rigid as a board—and placed him in a chair at one of the tables. The doctor may or may not have known the cause of this freakish phenomenon, but he proceeded to test for life. No heartbeat was detectable, and the patient's eyes were still set. He was all one piece, as if frozen in ice. The doctor finally placed a spoon in the man's open mouth. Directly upon withdrawing the spoon, he announced that there was still life. Then some men who had come in by that time carried the man away, still in his sitting position. Later on, we heard that he was functioning again. Someone said that he was



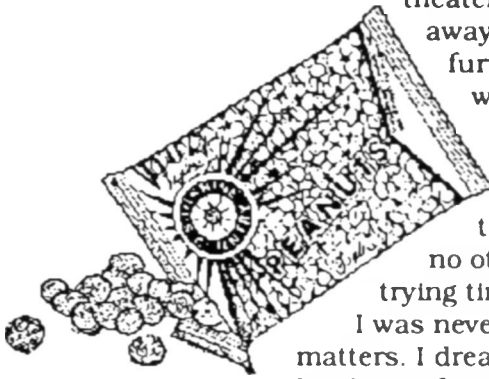
"Vida and I rotated our best, carefully watching that glassy stare. Just a "Boo!" would have dropped either of us."



addicted to embalming fluid, which was high in alcoholic content, and that he had overdosed on it—thus embalming himself.

I stayed with Oscar and Vida until I no longer needed to stand on a box in order to wash dishes. The two had no children; therefore, it made them proud in a way to be able to refer to me as their son. Finally, they bought a portable popcorn and peanut stand. They located it on the corner directly across the street from the restaurant in front of the bank and put me in charge. Quite a business it was, including a peanut roaster.

My busiest times were on Saturdays, satisfying the streaming crowds as they went to and from the movie theater across the street. The little man grinding away at his barrel of peanuts as they roasted furnished the attraction as the customers waited to be served. I was happy at my work, yet there are drawbacks to all things, I have found. The drawback in this case that was most bothersome was the pesky, ornery boys who were there for no other reason than to tantalize me during my trying times.



I was never inclined to complain to the boss on such matters. I dreaded the Burden brothers the most. They lived out of town three miles and wore the Big Hats. They came on Saturday and stayed all day. It was back in the days when the bigger the hat and the struttier the gait, the tougher the man. That is, until the final showdown! The Burdens had it made to some extent, thinning out the street's population of town boys of my category. Their headquarters unfortunately had to be my peanut stand.

There were three of the brothers, and I dreaded Billy, who was my age, the most. He pretended to like me but had a sneaky, tormenting, and very brazen attitude at times. I tried to accept his manner and put on a front as best as I could. My nature was to try to get along with everybody, and I would sometimes go overboard. Well, one day, Billy haggled me once too many times with his tomfoolery. He'd snuck my peanuts until at last my patience had rubbed raw.

It wasn't the relishing taste of peanuts that pleased him so much; it was the dilemma he kept me in. He was a nuisance at all times, but this act of stealing my peanuts irked me greatly and he knew it. I had warned him but to no avail. The compartment on the far side of the machine held a hole, the only one, and it unfortunately was on the far end next to the closed wing of the stand but still yet facing the front. Its position made it convenient for an impudent kid who had a small arm and a nimble finger to extract nicely roasted morsels at his convenience without much notice.

But notice we did, eyeballing each other through the plate glass compartments—him with his tormenting

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"possum-like" grin. There was nothing I could do about it during the rush hour. One day, however, it happened and it struck me like a flash. My temper sometimes worked that way. I didn't have it planned at all. My impulsive action went forth as if grooved to a track. The rush hour was on, but this time I vowed to hold my victim in contempt even far after things had quieted. Billy was definitely sentenced to a showdown with the likes of me. He'd now have to curl all of his fingers in making fists.

With the customers served and gone, to their astonishment I gently pushed the boys aside as I lowered the panels, saying that I was closing the joint to settle a little matter that wouldn't take long. I rounded the corner, trimmed off my apron and paper hat telling "Billy the Kid" to do likewise for he'd stolen his last peanut; and furthermore he was paying with his hide not only for the peanuts just taken but also for all that he'd ever stolen. We were settling things in general with a showdown.

Billy answered the challenge by quickly peeling off his coat and slinging it and the big hat a great distance, displaying his valor before the crowd of boys. I must have been blanked out half the time, working on instinct mostly I suppose while the battle raged. After we had stopped and stood panting and staring intently at each other, I could see he'd had enough. Upon moving forward to give him more of the same, he ran for his coat and hat, putting them on while crossing the street. About midway across, with me still standing my ground, such commotion took place I shall never forget and with such fervent satisfaction to me.

Billy looked as though he'd gone mad. Pandemonium broke out. With a jig to start, he struck out into a dead run across the street and up the alley, peeling off his clothes as he went. We found out later that in his mad dash for action showing the boys how easy it was to whip me he had flung his coat on an ant hill and the little devils were all teamed up and seething for his return. Anyone who has never been stung by a Western Oklahoma red ant has missed something. No wasp sting could be any worse. Billy dealt with an unsightly number of ants during those moments of desperation while delighting me.

No, Billy never bothered me anymore. We were young. We grew up, changed, and were more or less forgiving of the childish past. We'd meet up with each other at times and josh about days gone by, especially so of the time the red ants swarmed his pants before that large crowd of spectators. *

(ELMER M. MILLS lives in Neosho, Missouri. He enjoys reminiscing orally and in writing about his boyhood days spent in Weatherford—to the delight of his children and grandchildren and especially granddaughter Lori LeBahn, who serves as his main motivator and assistant.)

"With a jig to start, he struck out into a dead run across the street and up the alley, peeling off his clothes as he went."



Artwork by Joey Conkin